

How Exercise Radically Reduces Cancer Recurrence and Boosts Survival



Cancer & Exercise: New Study Reveals Movement's Power to Stop Recurrence & Boost Survival

Groundbreaking new research published in the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine* provides compelling evidence that structured exercise programs significantly improve outcomes for cancer patients, dramatically reducing the risk of recurrence and increasing survival rates. This study offers a powerful new perspective on exercise as a vital component of cancer treatment and recovery.

By Katia Hetter

We've long understood the myriad [benefits of regular physical activity](#), from warding off chronic conditions like diabetes and heart disease to boosting overall well-being. However, a recent landmark study elevates exercise's role to a critical therapeutic intervention, particularly for cancer patients. This randomized controlled trial definitively shows that individuals who engaged in a structured exercise regimen after cancer treatment lived longer without their cancer returning and faced a significantly [lower risk of death](#) compared to those in a control group.

To delve deeper into the profound "why" and "how" of exercise's [impact on cancer](#) risk and what this means for everyone, we consulted CNN wellness expert Dr. Leana Wen. As an emergency

physician, adjunct associate professor at George Washington University, and former Baltimore health commissioner, Dr. Wen provides invaluable insights into this pivotal research.

Why This Study's Findings Are a Game-Changer

"Previous research hinted at exercise's benefits for [cancer survivors](#), but this is the first randomized trial that concretely demonstrates exercise after cancer treatment can reduce recurrence and improve survival," explains Dr. Wen.

The study rigorously recruited nearly 900 patients from 55 cancer centers across six countries. All participants had been treated for either stage III or high-risk stage II colon cancer, a particularly relevant focus given that colon cancer recurs in an estimated 30% of patients even after intensive treatments like surgery followed by chemotherapy, often leading to fatal outcomes.

Patients were divided into two groups

Control Group: Received standard [health education materials](#) promoting healthy eating and general physical activity, which reflects current standard-of-care advice for patients in remission.

Structured Exercise Group: Participated in a comprehensive program involving consistent guidance from a health coach and supervised [exercise sessions](#). For the initial six months, patients had bi-monthly coaching, followed by monthly sessions, with additional support available as needed.

Significant Improvements in Physical Function and Outcomes

The results were compelling. Participants in the structured exercise group showed markedly superior improvements in [physical function](#), evidenced by greater distances walked in six minutes and higher predicted VO2 max, both key indicators of cardiovascular fitness.



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Over an average follow-up period of about eight years

Recurrence: 131 patients in the control group experienced cancer recurrence, compared to just 93 in the [structured exercise group](#).

Mortality: 66 individuals in the control group died, versus 41 in the structured exercise group.

This translates to astonishing statistics

28% lower risk of developing recurrent or new cancers for the structured exercise group.

37% lower risk of death within the trial period for the structured exercise group.

"This study's rigorous methodology confirms what prior research had suggested: Exercise unequivocally extends disease-free [survival for cancer patients](#)," Dr. Wen asserts. "It absolutely should be integrated as a fundamental part of holistic treatment to mitigate the risk of recurrent and new cancers."

Revolutionizing Cancer Care: The "Exercise Prescription"

Dr. Wen believes these findings should fundamentally reshape cancer treatment protocols. "Imagine if a new drug trial showed it could [lower cancer recurrence](#) by 28% and death risk by 37%," she poses. "Patients and doctors would embrace it as a monumental breakthrough, eager to incorporate it into therapy."



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Currently, post-treatment advice often includes general recommendations to exercise but rarely involves the structured support of a [health coach or trainer](#). Oncologists and primary care doctors may not routinely inquire about physical activity during follow-up appointments.

"I am hopeful this will change significantly," says Dr. Wen. "Patients could receive a formal 'exercise prescription,' with [healthcare providers](#) actively tracking their physical activity. Furthermore, insurance companies might consider reimbursing health coaches for cancer patients. This could be viewed as a prudent investment, potentially reducing the need for more costly chemotherapy and other treatments down the line."

The Biological Mechanisms: How Exercise Fights Cancer

Population studies have consistently demonstrated a long-standing association between regular [physical activity](#) and a reduced risk of developing certain cancers. Several theories explain these protective mechanisms:



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Weight Management: Exercise helps individuals maintain a [healthy weight](#). Obesity is a well-established risk factor for various cancers.

Hormonal Regulation: Physical activity is thought to help regulate certain [hormones](#) that play a role in cancer development.

Reduced Inflammation: Exercise can diminish chronic inflammatory responses in the body, which are also implicated in cancer progression.

How Much Exercise Do You Really Need?

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that adults aim for at least **150 minutes of moderate-to-high-intensity exercise per week**. This could translate to approximately 30 minutes, five times a week, of activities like [brisk walking](#), jogging, cycling, or swimming.

Crucially, these minutes are **cumulative**. You don't need to complete them all at once. For those who find it challenging to dedicate a large block of time to exercise, Dr. Wen suggests incorporating physical activity into daily routines through "[exercise snacks](#)":

Take the stairs: Instead of the elevator, even just a few flights can add up to 10 minutes of activity daily.

Walking meetings: If you have a phone meeting, consider taking it while walking in your neighborhood instead of sitting at your desk.

Park farther away: A few extra minutes of walking from your car can make a difference.

"Small changes truly do add up," she emphasizes.

Starting Your Exercise Journey: Progress Over Perfection

Dr. Wen's final advice for anyone embarking on an exercise program is simple: "Many studies show that while 150 minutes a week is ideal, even a small amount of physical activity offers significant benefits. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good—start with what you can."

Even brief [bursts of activity](#), sometimes called "exercise snacks," lasting as little as 15 or 30 seconds, are beneficial. This could be as simple as a few squats, climbing stairs, or engaging in household chores. For individuals working desk-bound jobs, simply getting up and moving around frequently can counter the negative health impacts of prolonged sitting. Every bit of movement contributes to better health and, as this new study suggests, a stronger defense against cancer.